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CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE.

- 1.—*The Life of John Milton*: Narrated in Connection with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of his Time. By DAVID MASSON, M. A., LL. D., Professor of Rhetoric and English Literature in the University of Edinburgh. Vol. IV., 1649–1654 (pp. 642). Vol. V., 1654–1660 (pp. 707). London: Macmillan & Co. 1877.

WERE Prof. Lowell on this side the Atlantic, we should hope to give him occasion, in these two volumes, for a supplement to that essay upon Milton with which, when the three preceding volumes appeared, he enriched our critical literature. At least, it is needless for us now to repeat the sufficient objections made by so accomplished a critic to the faults in Prof. Masson's plan, method, and manner, although we find new warrant for the praise he bestowed upon this most exhaustive biography. It may be true that too many chips from the workshop hang about Dr. Masson's work, that he follows too far Milton's remoter relations to the political, ecclesiastical, and literary history of his time; and, if 3,466 octavo pages conduct the reader no further than the threshold of "Paradise Lost," that the long life and the vast leisure of Methuselah would alone suffice for reaching its end. Nevertheless, we venture to think that any modern Ephemeris, addicted to the newspaper and the novel, might find briefer and better employ in this copious theme. Certainly the full knowledge of a cardinal epoch in the history of the strife and growth in England of what we now enjoy as English liberty is its own reward; and few indeed are the superior beings whose time would be wasted either in a microscopic study of John Milton's doings, day by day, during the Commonwealth and the Protectorate, or at gaze on him whose "soul was like a star and dwelt apart."

The charge of redundancy, at any rate, drops to its minimum while Dr. Masson, in these two volumes, labors the period from 1649 to 1660, which is the period from the first constitution of the Com-

monwealth to the final restoration of the monarchy, precisely covering Milton's service in an office of high trust and dignity, in attendance upon its founder and chiefs—the Latin secretaryship (for Latin was then the language of diplomatic communication). This office he held during the Rump, under five successive councils of state; during Cromwell's interim dictatorship and the Barebones Parliament, under three successive councils of state; during Oliver's first protectorate, under his council, and, during his second protectorate, under the privy council; during the brief protectorate of Richard, the restored Rump, the Wallingford House interregnum, and the second restoration of the Rump, under the successive state councils; till Monk's dictatorship prepared the recall of Charles. For, whether the life of Milton or the history of England during that decade be the particular question, not a line the less of this ample page would we wish unrolled; for here, if nowhere else, that life and that history intermix and flow along, a common stream. The biography of Milton would be unintelligible, did it not comprise a narrative of the great proceedings which his pen supported at home and defended abroad. That history would be defective and obscure did it not include the occasions when the governors of England, indignant at the massacre in Piedmont, committed their protest before the sovereignties of Europe to his large utterance, as thrice they committed their declarations of the causes of war, against the Scots, against the Dutch, against the Spaniard; or when thrice they summoned him, as the best publicist of all England, to vindicate the regicide and the republic "to foreign nations and the next ages."

Besides, the life of Milton and the history of England during the time of Cromwell and the Charleses are but now beginning to be fully written. It is little more than half a century since the accidental discovery, in the State-Paper Office, of John Milton's "Treatise on Christian Doctrine" gave Macaulay occasion for that dashing *Edinburgh Review* essay on the great English epic poet, which displaced Dr. Johnson's surly and coarse, but masculine, performance in the "Lives of the Poets," as the popular summary of Milton's gifts and achievements, and which in a morning made its author famous, and foreshadowed his brilliant career. But Macaulay's essay, like Johnson's life, like the biographies of Toland, Todd, Mitford, and Keightley, can hardly be read with patience now. Nothing better may have been possible then. All the more does one wish that Macaulay were alive to-day, to follow Dr. Masson in his furthest research, to fill himself full of his theme, and

then to enshrine, in that style of his which Jeffrey could "not conceive where he had picked up," a true, unfading portraiture of Milton. Was not such the prayer of the *Lycidas*?

"So may some gentle Muse
With lucky words favor *my* destined urn,
And as he passes turn,
And bid fair peace be to my sable shroud."

Not that critics, like Coleridge, Hazlitt, Landor, Hallam, Channing, and Matthew Arnold, have left everything to be said in appreciation of the masterpieces of his prose or verse; not that the regret of Southey, in 1827, that a life of Milton should still be a desideratum in our literature, has been for yet another half-century any reproach. The fact is, that the materials for such a portraiture, based upon an ample and final life of Milton, and the materials for a dispassionate history of England itself in the seventeenth century, have been lately brought to light in such abundance, from sources hitherto unknown or unsearched, that the postponement has been no loss, but a gain, to English literature. The calendar of events during this period, and their broad outlines, and many details, were not lacking, of course; but critical documents, lifelike incidents, turning speeches, the springs of partisan combinations, the secrets of English politics and interests, at a day when these were interfused in Continental interests and politics, were, as often as not, undiscovered or misunderstood. And they who know not these in the full vividness of detail, and in the color, line, and life, of authentic contemporary chronicle, are condemned never to know the majestic Milton as he was, when his pen was the pen of the Commonwealth and of Cromwell, and his voice the chosen voice of the passion, the pride, and the power of England.

The researches and discoveries of Bruce, of Masson himself, of Spedding, of Forster, and especially of Gardiner, have darted unexpected beams of light among the knots and crises of this period of English and European history, much as if some one had turned up among the treasures of the British Museum a file of the *London Times*, from 1617 to 1660. The daily newspaper did not indeed appear till 1702; nor till long thereafter did its pages disclose the secrets of state councils, and show "the very age and body of the time, his form and pressure." But the sagacious historians whom we have named, exploring the dusty archives of Simancas, Venice, and Brussels, have found the notes of reporters as observant and astute as any that are detailed by the great journals of our day to

reside in Washington or in London, at Berlin or on the Bosphorus. And in truth, Russell with the Prince of Wales in India, Oliphant in Paris under the Commune, Hurlbert in Rome at the Œcumenical Council, McGahan at Khiva, Stanley at Coomassie and Magdala, Forbes with the armies of the Czar in Bulgaria, are, in a changed world, the lineal descendants of Gondomar and Zen and Soranzo, of Coran, Joachimi, and Salvetti. Moreover, besides these dispatches of the Spanish, the Venetian, the Dutch, and the Florentine ambassadors, now reperused in the originals, or accessible in transcript or translation made of late for the Museum Library or the Master of the Rolls; besides the correspondence of the archdukes with the kings of Spain, with the emperor, and with Maximilian of Bavaria, which reveal the most confidential designs of the leaders of the Catholic party; and besides the greater and increasing treasures of the Record-Office for these and earlier periods lately calendared and indexed; also, during recent years, there have been discovered, in country-houses and castles, other and domestic records of those stirring times no less precious and authentic. For an instance or two: the papers of the first Earl of Bristol; the Fawsley MS., edited by Gardiner for the Camden Society; the Elsynge MSS., unearthed at Crowcombe Court, comprising full official notes of debates in the House of Lords, hitherto unknown save by some passing reference in a contemporary letter, during the last two Parliaments of James and the first three Parliaments of Charles; and those priceless relics of an imperishable name, published by John Forster, or preserved by Lord St. Germans, the speeches, documents, and notes of Sir John Eliot.

Who shall sketch a tithe of the partial restoration which, here and there, accepted English history, like the defaced or patched architecture, encasing and incongruous, of some venerable cathedral, is to undergo? Let us not even glance at the figure of Henry VIII., now revealed in his true purposes and character, nor at Thomas Becket; let us not even stop to wonder at the plot of James and Buckingham, in 1620, to invade and partition the territory of the Dutch Republic; nor pause, save for a moment, to be glad that the charge against Bacon of having knowingly and corruptly sold or delayed justice has been shredded and consumed. It is enough, in this scanty notice, to indicate where that historic edifice must be rebuilt, on one or two lines not outside the term of Milton's life.

The last edition of the best English cyclopædia did not, the latest of the best American cyclopædia does not, record in its alpha-

bet the name of one who is now known for the proto-martyr of English political liberty—of him who at least was the first to fall in the long duel between crown and Parliament, giving his life for the “sanctuary of liberty, the guardian of the rubrics of the law.” Sir John Eliot was the first of England’s parliamentary statesmen. Buckingham was his quarry. “The minister, not the king, was responsible.” Had he lived to guide his party, it is possible to imagine that Charles might have escaped the block, James II. avoided exile, Cromwell gone “guiltless of his country’s blood,” and that something less than a revolution might have conciliated that fading tradition which justified the King of England in claiming the supreme regulative power in the nation, with that tradition which forbade him from claiming to be the source of its law. While Sir John Eliot lived and led his party, Pym and Hampden followed, inferior in rank. When his noble and unconquered spirit passed, it left liberty in things spiritual, intellectual, and political, still to be learned in England’s and New England’s suffering, and taught in Milton’s prose and song. But the issue which he made in Parliament and in the Tower, and to which, though a Selden bleached, Eliot was faithful unto death, predestined for English-speaking peoples the ultimate victory of that safest rule of government, the free utterance of the thoughts of the representatives of the people, and the ultimate justification, too, of his faith in the common-sense of the common people, not indeed to govern directly, but to compel satisfaction and reform from those who do, by shifting their task to abler and purer hands.

Charity for Laud, honor for Wentworth as no apostate—these are not quite the pigments of partisans like Macaulay, Goldwin Smith, Forster, or Green. But who could have expected that our last official eulogist of Roger Williams, not blushing before his bronze image and upon the soil of Rhode Island to extenuate the unequivocal, just fame both of him and of Milton, would leave Dr. Masson to relate how the transatlantic friend of Vane, at the very nick of time, was the central champion in England of absolute voluntarism, against the Independents and the famous fifteen proposals for a state Church on their sort of “Christian Fundamentals”—“preaching to the contrary illegal.” Finally, who could have believed, till Milton’s biographer exhumed the proof, that the last year of his fading eyesight was spent by the author of the “Areopagitica” as an official licenser of the press—that as such he stood for editor-in-chief to the once notorious *Mercurius Pragmati-*

cus, of the royalists—Marchamont Needham, then Mercurius Politicus, in defense of the Commonwealth? It was an incident of this employment that he “ordered in” a morally “double-leaded leader” on Cromwell’s “crowning mercy,” if perchance his own hand did not itself thus sprinkle “Worcester’s laureate wreath.” Let this fact pique our readers’ curiosity enough to send them to Prof. Masson’s volumes. Albeit let no man venture the treasonable imagination that any restorations or disclosures of the truth of history have erased, or can erode, the epitaph of John Milton as, of all liberties—religious, intellectual, and political—the foremost advocate and ever-faithful defender. His ardent and magnanimous nature throbbed with such divine amplitude and energy, that it could involve in its own vibrations the agitated soul of a nation, and transmit, redoubled, to distant thrones and peoples, the deep tones of her deliberate valor, or the terrible tocsins of her wrath. But the overtones, never silent in that magnetic resonance, were those which sang the august and sacred aspirations of civilized man for the pure atmosphere of perfect freedom.

2.—*A History of England in the Eighteenth Century.* By WILLIAM EDWARD HARTPOLE LECKY. Vols. I. and II.

THERE are several ways of writing history. The earliest method, or that exemplified in the classics of Greece and Rome (Herodotus, perhaps, excepted), gave us scarcely any notion of the condition of the people, either morally or economically, the state of religion and philosophy, and the progress of art, science, and literature; but concerned itself solely with political and military matters, with great rulers and great generals, with the rise and fall of governments and dynasties, with invasions and conquests, with the march of armies and stirring descriptions of battles, with the triumphs of victorious hosts, and the difficulties, dangers, and horrors of retreats. It admitted, nay courted, the composition of speeches which were real only in so far as they corresponded with the character, or supposed character, of the personages whom the historian was describing; and the writer’s talent was displayed in nothing more than in depicting such scenes as the plague at Athens, and Hannibal’s crossing the Alps, or in furnishing heroes with harangues that rival the orations of Demosthenes.

In more modern history, we have discarded these specimens of eloquence as approaching too near to fiction; but for a long period the moderns took no more interest than the ancients in the state of